

Poetry of William Butler Yeats

Enrichment: Philosophy

Spiritual Eclecticism

The work of W. B. Yeats contains a clear spiritual sense, but his plays were denounced as irreligious. Yeats was a spiritual eclectic. The word *eclectic* means “composed of various sources,” and comes from a Greek word meaning “to pick out.” Yeats chose elements of diverse beliefs that appealed to him. Eclecticism borrows and combines ideas from various contexts, but may ignore their fundamental differences.

The idea that no one belief has a monopoly on truth was strong as early as the second century B.C., when Greek thinkers tried to unify many philosophies. Early Christian philosophers adapted Greek metaphysics and borrowed from other religions.

Modern eclectic philosophy was advanced by French philosopher Victor Cousin in the nineteenth century. Yeats, a student of French thought, joined a Theophilosophical Society when he was twenty-two, seeking to promote brotherhood through mysticism. He never felt completely at home in either Protestant or Catholic Ireland, nor in England. Amid political strife, Yeats sought unity in a mysticism deeper, he felt, than the troubles he knew, hoping to heal with art what had not been healed with politics and religion.

DIRECTIONS: Use critical thinking skills and your understanding of Yeats’s work to answer the following questions.

1. What might be the advantages and disadvantages of eclectic spiritualism?

2. In what way might Yeats’s attitude toward death, as expressed in these selections, depart from a traditional Christian attitude?

3. What ideas or images in “The Second Coming” seem to combine differing philosophies?

4. Identify three suggestions of spiritual eclecticism in “Sailing to Byzantium.”
